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Vol. 1 1977 No. 2

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Chip Kizzia

GERALD O'GRADY: THE PERSPECTIVE FROM BUFFALO

By
KAREN MOONEY

Gerald O'Grady is the nucleus of one of the most elaborate and comprehensive media programs in the world. The bearer of two Ph.D.'s in medieval literature and a teacher of literature and communications at numerous schools and universities, Dr. O'Grady regards himself as a "philosophical anthropologist—someone who is interested in culture, the ways culture is transmitted through codes, and in theorizing about the methods used to examine these ways."

From an office on the campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo, Dr. O'Grady directs the

Educational Communications Center which supplies all media services to the university; the Center for Media Study, a degree-granting program; and Media Study/ Buffalo, an extensive community program. Through these organizations, he steers a movement to proliferate participation in communications processes—from snapshots to satellites—at all levels, from children to Ph.D.'s.

The root idea is this: "Literacy's been with us now since the nineteenth century and is pretty much accepted to be a universal thrust. My own theory is

that we should move towards what I call 'mediacy.' It's a political issue: one cannot participate in society unless one can use the channels or codes of communication that are current in the time that one lives."

"I'm not saying that everyone has to make tapes and have them shown. While the Constitution guarantees the pursuit of happiness, it doesn't guarantee happiness. But it seems to me that it has to guarantee access."

"My own theory is that we should move towards what I call 'mediacy' and it's a political issue."

Dr. O'Grady's first effort to change this situation in Buffalo was the establishment of Media Study/Buffalo four years ago. At that time it offered its first 20-week workshop of film and video, free to the community, taught by such artists as Stan Vanderbeek, Ed Emshwiller, and Yvonne Andersen. "In the beginning," Dr. O'Grady explains, "the concept was to get people involved in all the media, looking at different kinds of image processes—still, moving, video, and so forth. We were hoping that those people would go out and start little units of their own and teach others, and some of them have."

Now Media Study, in addition to offering workshops in the various media and even in circuit design ("we think it's important to give artists access to designing their own tools"), also serves as an information service and a funding conduit, and operates several screening programs and a distribution network. "The principle is access and that's kind of the system—to give information and training and competency through access to equipment, access to work by others, access to distribution of their own work, access to money outside of our own, and then access to advice on legal and other problems. Access is a word for environment."

At least four or five films or videotapes are screened weekly, many accompanied by the artist. This is a system to funnel aid and money back to the working artist. The screening system encourages access: "Instead of showing films and tapes in one place, again, we promote access to a variety of screenings all over the city. We see ourselves as catalytic and cooperative and what we try to do always is to make the best use of the financial material and human resources in a whole community." The screening sites include libraries, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Shea's Buffalo (the "Radio City of Buffalo"), and these cultural organizations supply the space and projection while Media Study makes the selection and supplies the money for film rental.

The most recent asset to Media Study's structure is the acquisition of the Mars Hotel, a 100,000 square foot, seven-story former-hotel, which houses fifty

climate controlled editing rooms, offices, living space, and the largest sound studio in New York State.

The building, part of a city block acquisition assessed at \$640,000, is near the site of a new transit system being built in Buffalo which will deposit 40,000 people daily near the former hotel. "It puts us in a very good position. We moved there to help resurrect downtown. That was one of our interests, to contribute to the urban development."

Some of the other community affairs and services for which Media Study/Buffalo is responsible are a project with the City Council to do an interactive cable information service within one precinct, an internship program with the cable stations, and an NEA filmmaker in the schools program, and, in cooperation with the university, a nationally sponsored summer youth-in-residence program which gives training to talented youths in the arts.

A second facet of Dr. O'Grady's enterprise is the direction of the "Center for Media Study" which he founded four years ago at SUNY/Buffalo to "involve people in the relation of consciousness to codes to cultures." He elaborates: "I think each of us has our own mind or consciousness which is in interaction with culture, which is physical, environmental, social—all these different systems—and that you do that interaction—the kind of I-thou relationship—through codes—gestures, language, and especially, what was lacking here and most places, any knowledge of image codes, what I call the moving image."

"... What we try to do always is to make the best use of the financial material and human resources in a whole community."

The faculties of both Media Study and the Center for Media Study reflect the essential relationship of making to understanding. "The only people who I thought could really speak knowledgeably about film and video materials were people who are practitioners." For this reason the core faculty consists of Hollis Frampton, Woody Vasulka, Steina Vasulka, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad, Brian Henderson, and James Blue.

The programs work on three levels: making, including film, video, holography, computers; history, tradition, and interpretation of these image structures; and their psychological and social effect. Although students, working towards B.A., M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D. degrees will be able to concentrate or combine any of these three areas, Dr. O'Grady states that "Everyone in the program has to participate in the making side. Generally, we think that it's a good idea for the makers to have some idea of the traditions and history but we're not as concerned with that."

The Center for Media Study also offers a summer program called the "Summer Institute for Making and

Understanding Media," which offers seven-week courses taught by visiting teachers, a large number of visiting speakers, and a conference. The conference topic for this past summer, "Electronic Tools Design," fits well into the media system teaching program in general: "We have conceptual systems and tools which result from them, and then the works that result from the tools. Generally, most of the things I do are thought through in that design fashion. And the purpose of that is to open us up to all different new kinds of image designs that are coming forth."

"The center of education will have to become codes because codes are the media—the connectors, the ligatures—between consciousness and culture."

For all this, Dr. O'Grady's "one paying job" is Director of the Educational Communications Center at the University, "an agency like the library or computing center which serves the other 126 departments." It operates a public radio station, WBFO, and the first language laboratory to have video and film in addition to audio as basic components of teaching language. It also is planning all the audio-visual spaces for a new campus at Amherst, outside of Buffalo, which will be the largest campus ever built in world history (\$650 million). Within three years there will be two 2400-square foot color television studios with 2-inch and 1-inch capability, and satellite connection. There will be 32 video and audio channels between all buildings.

These programs operate within a fertile setting.

SUNY/Buffalo is the largest of the SUNY system of 72 campuses and over 350,000 students—"The largest university in the whole history of the world." And the city of Buffalo itself is "one of the most media-ized city in the world"—it has outlets for the three major networks, a public television station, a UHF station, three television channels from Canada, four cable companies, seventy-five commercial radio stations, and three public radio stations. "It's a place where there are a lot of channels open for communication."

"Oh, Buffalo's an interesting place, because on one hand it's within New York State and it's sophisticated and relatively well-financed and on the other hand it's really like a mid-western city, like the old cities of Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee—in some ways it's almost a 19th century industrial city; after years of going downhill, just beginning to turn around. It's right on the border of a foreign country. And it's within \$100 round trip of everywhere—Toronto, Montreal, Boston, New York, Washington. So we use that system and we bring everyone through here all the time. The Rockefeller "State of the Art" report says we're a small media think-tank, and that's what we try to be."

From this perspective, Dr. O'Grady commented on future directions: "My general sense is that the arts,

so-called, will have to relocate themselves in what I call culture, something broader, and I think that's happening. I'm not saying that they went in the wrong direction. I think they went in the absolutely right direction, in other words they won't let the rest of culture keep them back; they're more advanced. But I think it's now important that they somehow interact with other cultural systems and I think that's going on."

"I would hope that everyone would become a philosophical anthropologist and I think that'll be the direction of future education, that teachers will teach codes, they won't teach language."

"I think we have to become more sophisticated about the whole environment of teaching and that teaching be centered on codes, just to make it clear once and for all that man is man because he is a symbol-making animal . . . The center of education will have to become codes because codes are the media—the connectors, the ligatures—between consciousness and culture. And that's my educational program, to keep those three in an interactionary dance, because your consciousness is always changing and your culture is always changing, and your codes, print and visual information, even though they change less quickly, also change."

"Images will become crucial," because the amount of information in the world is increasing so swiftly that "the only possible way of keeping in touch with it, especially after you've gone through school, is through the public media—image transmission which is, of course, information in condensed form."

Dr. O'Grady summarized the Buffalo activity:

"We're involved here not only at the boundaries of the experimental tradition with the Vasulkas moving into computers and stereoscopic explorations, but we're also very much involved in serving the community in the documentary, the basic recording and revelation of people to each other, some type of interactionary form—there James Blue is one of the modern masters."

"So I'm in a unique position. Through the ECC, we serve all the departments at a major university. The State is still the best endowed materially and has the most advanced education system, is most open to the arts, and has an arts council budget that's more than the other 50 states put together. We have our own 'research and development' within that, the Center for Media Study, which is an academic program which teaches courses and gives degrees. That faculty includes Hollis Frampton who is 'making/remaking the history of film as it should have been made,' and Paul Sharits is investigating the multiple forms of presentation of the celluloid image and the deepest sources of filmic materials and Brian Henderson's work has been in the basic demystification of previous film theories. My hope is to be as inventive in pedagogical and social formulations. At the foundation, Media Study/Buffalo, the task is to structure the media environment in the community." ■ ■ ■